The Nine Muses: Where Writers Get Their Ideas From

Current theories of creativity don't mention divine inspiration. It isn't politically correct to suggest that the best stories are given to a few fated writers by God, or that great plots and characters are bestowed on favoured authors by goddesses, or that famous poems are already realised in a perfect form before human hand puts words on a page.

On a marble bookshelf hewn at the beginning of the literary timeline, however, there are some mighty witnesses to divine inspiration. Homer and Hesiod would never have started to speak without an invocation to the Muses: a prayer, a prod, a plea for supernatural assistance to find the perfect turn of phrase.

'Let us begin, goddess of song,' Homer says at the opening of the *Iliad*, acknowledging that he wasn't going to narrate this epic solo. 'Sing in me Muse, and through me tell the story,' he says in the first lines of the *Odyssey*; 'begin it goddess at whatever point you will'. No claim of originality, no promise it was all his own work; Homer plagiarises ideas from a higher source. He mentions one muse but, three hundred years later, thrice-three voices are heard dictating Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Born of Zeus and the Titan Mnemosyne in a marriage that lasted nine days, the Nine Muses discovered letters and invented language. They were portrayed, on walls and floors, on jars and sepulchres, as beautiful virgins wearing palm wreaths, laurel leaves and feathers they won from the Sirens in a singing competition. Their mother was goddess of memory and time, keeper of the oral tradition, with tales preserved by word of mouth before there was writing.

Those stories were true, in a way; because the evidence was concrete. We know the nine had a nurse named Eupheme because her image was carved in a stone grotto, on the road to the grove of the Muses, still cited in Greek guide books of the second century AD. The timeline ties fact and fiction together so tightly, here, that you could walk along it and see where the action happened.

Moved by the ancient myth, Roman poets evoked the same heavenly voices. An ode of Horace asks, 'Do you hear her, or does an amiable delusion mock me?' Does the muse sing the same way to other authors, in different times and diverse places; and can modern writers (on a minor scale) catch a murmur, too?

The Muses' home was Mount Helicon, where they guarded the Hippocrene spring from which poets and philosophers drank for inspiration. Horse-shoe shaped, it gushed from the rock where Pegasus stamped a hoof for joy at meeting his ecstatic hostesses, the Musae, for the first time.

Down the mountainside, the town of Thespies held Mouseai festivals every five years from the 6th century BC. The Thespians hosted poets and singers from all over Greece, competing in epic, rhapsody or satire. A poetic Olympic games, it didn't last as long as the javelin or go as far as the discus; but art isn't sport. The Museum of Alexandria, for example, founded by Ptolemy I, was a temple dedicated to the Muses: this art was religion.

The Muses taught the Sphinx her riddle, lured unwanted suitors to their deaths from the tops of towers, and blinded any poet or singer who claimed to be a better musician than them.

Thamyris was the best singer-songwriter in Thrace, trained by the legendary Linus before he taught Orpheus; so cocky, though, he challenged the Muses to a singing contest. If he'd won, the prize was to sleep with all nine, or marry one. Depending on whose version of the story you read, Appollodorous or Euripides, he'd get all of them once, or one of them always. But you can't beat the Muses at music; they invented singing and were simply the best. They blinded Thamyris and took back the gift of song. He never strummed his cithara again.

Heeding this warning, a classical author would have a shrine to his muse; a special relationship built with one of the nine, to whom he devoted his work. From comedy to tragedy, erotica to sci-fi, there is one here for every kind of writer to revere:

Calliope is the eldest of the Muses, identified with philosophy and epic poetry. Legend has it 'beautiful voice' was the mother of immortal poet Orpheus, with Apollo as his father. Calliope's emblems are stylus and wax tablet, though she was made a cheerleader for literacy long after her birth in the oral tradition.

Clio is the Muse of historical and heroic poetry. 'The proclaimer' was credited with introducing the Phoenician alphabet into Greece, and her attribute is a parchment scroll. But perhaps she is muse as spinster, weaver of tales, from the time when women told stories with a needle instead of a pen.

Erato is the Muse of lyric poetry, particularly the erotic. She is also goddess of mimicry; even divinities sometimes fake their pleasure. Her name means lovely, and she is shown with a lyre. She turns men who follow her into heartthrobs; whether actors, singers or poets, they become objects of women's desire.

Euterpe is the Muse whose name means delight; and music is her domain. She is often pictured playing a double flute, her own speciality; making her the muse of multi-taskers, too.

Melpomene is the Muse of tragedy. Clad as a tragic actor, name loosely translating as 'choir', this is muse as lost mother, goddess of mourning and melancholy. Her sister Thalia presides over comedy and pastoral, merry and idyllic poetry. She favours rural pursuits, and is pictured holding a comic mask and a shepherd's staff. Think Felicity Kendal, in *The Good Life*, as a modern embodiment of this muse of amusement.

Polyhymnia is goddess of the sublime and sacred hymn. She is shown in a pensive mood without any props. 'Many songs of praise' could be the muse who channels messages to the non-writers, in famous instances such as Edgar Cayce's, a semi-literate Christian from Cleveland who had a vision of an angel in the woods one night in 1889, and was suddenly able to perform supernatural acts of reading, seeing and healing; witnessed by a wide public and psychic researchers.

Terpsichore is the Muse of dance. Surprisingly, she is often shown sitting down, but this may be because she is a teacher rather than a performer. Generously passing on her best moves, 'the whirler' should be invoked by writers who want their words to have rhythm, energy and grace.

Urania is Muse of astronomy and astrology. She is dressed in a cloak embroidered with stars and raises her eyes to the sky. Her name means heavenly. All who work in the realms of fantasy and science fiction, those authors who sup from the cyber cup, would pick this goddess to worship.

There have been hundreds of claims made for a tenth muse. Sappho was probably the first to be called this, but these days it can be anything from the writer's pushy mother to drink and drugs. Inspiration literally means to inhale. According to Robert Graves, it was' the breathing-in by the poet of fumes from an intoxicating cauldron containing a mash of barley, acorns, honey, bull's blood and such sacred herbs as ivy, hellebore and laurel, or mephitic fumes from an underground vent as at Delphi…'

The Muses may well hold a pen in one hand and a smoke in the other; or perhaps a steaming mug, a measure of herbal remedy for writer's block. Probably the earliest reference to tea in English Literature; in an ode to Charles II's new queen, Catherine of Braganza, by poet and politician Edmund Waller, it's called 'The Muse's friend'.

Later students of the Muses admit to using a stronger friend to fuel their fancy, though. AE Houseman raises his glass, thus:

'Oh many a peer of England brews
Livelier liquor than the Muse,

And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man'.

So as Calliope, Clio and co. stagger off, along a timeline written first and foremost by men, it's still not clear where they stand on that fine line between fact and fiction.

The era of Spenser, Sidney, The Earl of Surrey and Shakespeare might have been the Renaissance but was it a rebirth for the muse? A bard brought them home to English Lit with these lines of 1536; 'Here I am in Kent and Christendom/ Among the Muses where I read and rhyme'. A heyday in the home counties for the nine goddesses of tale-telling from golden age Helicon but the groves were being cut down where the Muses whispered lyrics. Edmund Spenser suggests, in 'The Teares of the Muses', that their floaty figures are leaving the local grottos. The female forms Sir Philip Sidney worshipped were mortal, though; and laughing. ''Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart, and write.'' The divine podcast goes on, but in the service of a poet knight pursuing ladies of the court, the content may be earthy.

At this point when the pen and the sword are both mighty reminders of the penis, the muse's appearance on the literary timeline is disappointing. In Shakespeare's sonnets, she is often mentioned, but always because of an unsatisfying performance. In Sonnet 85 she is 'tongue-tied' and in Sonnet 101 she is 'truant'.

Do the sexual dynamics in this poet/muse relationship, a Jungian marriage like animus and anima, mean that the writer always has to be a man, or that female poets must be lesbians? This economy of inspiration would cast the Muses as sexist and homophobic. But around Shakespeare's point on the timeline, art starts to be about the self. The chanter who simply channelled the plot, typically blind like Homer and Milton, suddenly gets a mirror. At that point, too, the archetype of the bard, invoked as a genius from the past, can provide a male muse for female poets, as well as for men. One of Milton's first published pieces evoked Shakespeare's 'delphick lines' as a source of his vision. This becomes the norm; while, from the enlightenment on, for a scribe to get ideas from nine scantily-clad pagan priestesses becomes rather inappropriate.

Even the Sapphos of the modern age don't mention the muse much. The postmodern woman writer doesn't tend to get turned on by Greek goddesses of inspiration. Perhaps men, marriage, motherhood are their m words; after they've said me me me. The muse is outmoded, they see right through her.

Since Margaret Cavendish, in 1623, lady poets have written about science. Twenty-first century poetesses honour Urania, too, from Lavinia Greenlaw in 'Electricity' and 'Gallileo's Wife' to Alice Oswald's 'Excursion to the Planet Mercury'. But the Muses might be too big for the microscope-gazers; too beautiful for the navel-gazers. Women's poetry is not against enchantment, but it's resistant to abuse by the muse.

Metrical or mystical, magical or mechanical; madness and music have been accompaniments to writing since Helicon days, when the Muses conducted mountainside rituals. When Hermes first invented the lyre from a tortoiseshell, it had nine strings in their honour. He gave it to Apollo, who became 'Musagetes', but his more sober followers only wore laurel wreaths without drinking or smoking the leaves.

Trying to walk a timeline of the Muses' influence shows that it is neither straight nor linear. Once, their invocation was proper then fashion made a series of polite excuses, learning to mock or mimic them; but, at every step in Western literary history there are writers who seem to tune in to a constant stream of inspiration from the Hippocrene spring, and writers who turn it off. Many may still say 'the muse is with me' when the ideas come fast and flowing and the source seems, not so much unconscious (as modern theories of creativity will have it), as all-knowing.

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